

GERMAN LITERATURE.

PROF. SCHERER'S HISTORICAL SURVEY.

A HISTORY OF GERMAN LITERATURE. By W. SCHERER. Translated from the third German edition. Six Volumes. VOL. I. CONVERSATION. Edited by E. MAX MILLER. Price, \$12.00, pp. xli, 401; vii, 425. Charles Scribner's Sons.

There are not many histories of literature, in whatever language, which can be read with the unfeigned interest likely to be excited by this work, even in those who are quite ignorant of the German tongue and who have only that general acquaintance with a few German masterpieces which translations are supposed to furnish to every man of fair education. A clear and animated style, a talent for judicious condensation, power of generalizing, skill in arrangement, and a gift of rapid and effective narrative, are among the attractions of the author's manner. But a very large share of his success is attributable to his excellent plan.

Although the number of writers mentioned and characterized in the book is very large, and the statement of what they accomplished is precise and full, it results in this other hand in a singularly effective treatment of the latest period of German literature, which fills nearly the whole of the second volume.

Lessing is the introduction to this splendid era; Goethe presently becomes the central figure in it, and remains so, dominating the productive activity of all German-speaking countries, until his death, which is the date chosen for the close of this history. Professor Scherer's arrangement is partly by subjects and partly by the order of time. Thus while he gives a connected account of most of the writers of the period separately, he distributes the remarks upon Goethe in several sections, balances the merits and defects of his works, and assigns to each of his chief productions its relative rank—a criticism of which Dr. Samuel Johnson was the most distinguished professor. Neither is there place for that modern biographical style which studies an author's works by the light of his personal adventures, and treats the poet, not as a development of his time and circumstances, but as the isolated product of a special creation. Each of these methods has its uses in literary criticism, but neither is adequate for a comprehensive history of literature.

Two classical periods are generally recognized in German literature, but our author believes that there were in reality three; although of the first every text perished except fragments of a single sonnets' poetical creation were revived in the legends of the second period, and were thus handed down to our day. The three culminating points of German literary history are separated from each other by intervals of about 600 years, and the periods of greatest depression are the same distance apart. The German national epic attained its highest development about A. D. 600. In the tenth century culture had declined to its lowest depth; and although some remnant of it was carefully preserved in the monasteries, where there was considerable activity in the metrical treatment of religious and also of secular themes, the popular poet of the period was the roving minstrel, or gleeman, who wandered from court to court with the latest news, and may properly be called the journalist of his time. He was a coarse and irreverent jester, working over old materials without improving them; and we meet with hardly any trace of creative power or poetic taste until a century later, when literature, instead of being merely an amusement for the people, became a serious pursuit of the knightly aristocratic class.

This was the dawn of chivalry, and with it came the revival of German heroic song and the golden age of Middle High-German poetry. About the year 1200 the half-forgotten hero-legends reappeared, and were embodied in the "Nibelungenlied" and "Gudrun," and lyric and epic poets of the first order arose, like Wolfram von Eschenbach, Gottfried von Strassburg, and Walther von der Vogelweide. The account of these famous poems, and of these three famous poets, filling a considerable part of the first volume, will fascinate the reader by brilliant and penetrating criticism, vivid pictures of the remote past, and extraordinary aptitude for the difficult art of telling a story.

In the next era of decline, which lasted until the period of the Reformation or somewhat later, our historian has a great deal to say upon the only aspect of his subject which rouses him in the polemical spirit. The decay of poetry after the thirteenth century is attributable, he thinks, not to intrinsic causes, but to various outside hostile influences. The increase of the trading interest, the passion for material improvement, the diversion to mercantile and industrial enterprises of the energy once expended in high ventures like the crusades, the transformation of political and social life by the new prosperity, even the increase of learning and the extension of practical research, had a blighting effect upon the imaginative faculties, exactly as a similar phase of civilization seems to have in our own day. But the greatest enemy of poetry was the Church. All through the history of literature we trace a conflict between the secular ideal of life, which inspired poetry, and the religious ideal preached by the clergy. The life of pleasure, indulgence, gay humor, cheerful content with nature and satisfaction in sensuous beauty, the life which a delicate poet of the Middle Ages personified as "Lusty World"—this was the life which the typical singer celebrated, and literature was nearest precisely when this ideal had the firmest hold upon the general mind. The popular songs of the wandering minstrels and the verses of chivalric courtiers ran in the same direction; only the love of wine and women, or what Professor Scherer, emphatically, but in all seriousness, calls "liberal morality," was more riotous with glee than with knighthood. The standard virtues of chivalry, as the historian acknowledges, became very different from those of the religious ideal. Loyalty, honor, generosity, moderation, steadfastness—these were the highest qualities of knighthood, as poetry understood it. But loyalty in a bad service may be a vice, honor meant little more than the love of reputation, generosity was vague in its objects, moderation included liberal morals provided the sins were not scandalously open, steadfastness was often only self-esteem. The characteristic knightly virtues were quite consistent with a very evil life. Professor Scherer's sympathies are wholly with the secular ideal. He loves the light-hearted singer for whom the world is enough, and the self-reliant Titan who will make his own fate and ask no help from the gods. He has no tolerance for the "gloomy" temperament which broods over the last things, or what he calls the "crying pieté" which would hamper the free expression of natural impulse in deference to the prejudices of religion. Yet if poetry became what he represents it, one can readily understand how it fell under the ban of the preacher. The "beautiful secular life" which it represented was not beautiful at all. Its strongest marks, between the twelfth and the fifteenth century, were to be rapine and sensual indulgence, especially unchastity. When St. Francis sent out his Preaching Friars their mission was to scourge the vices of a society corrupt in every branch, from the popes down to the poets; and the degradation of literature which they attacked was only one symptom of a general decline. The most notable of the Franciscan orators, according to our author, was Berthold of Regensburg. "It would be an exaggeration to attribute to Berthold alone the destruction of Middle High-German poetry; but he is anyhow the most striking figure among many similar men who zealously attacked that beautiful secular life which was the source of Middle High-German poetry, and which had already begun to be threatened from other quarters. We notice the influence of the sermon in the 'Sprachpoetry' and didactic poetry of this period; we see it converting the chivalrous epic into the saintly legend, trying to confine lyric poetry to sacred hymns, and only stopping its advances by the invincible love of laughter and desire of amusement inherent in the masses of the people; and Berthold is the man to whose charge we may lay all this." Hardly "all this," for the change began half a century before his time, and Professor Scherer departs it in the last song of Walther von der Vogelweide, which were devoted to religious themes. The Preaching Friars did not bring about a lasting reformation of morals, and they would not have greatly affected the literary expression of the secular life if poetry had not been already decaying under the influences of the nobility, the growth of the commercial and utilitarian spirit, the increasing love of knowledge, are enumerated by our author; but we are

justified in concluding that the germs of corruption were in the poetry itself, which proved false to its mission when it followed the secular ideal through the coarse delights of a lax and ignoble age. Didacticism does not overthrow art until art has become enervated by its own excesses.

In fact, a defect of Professor Scherer's literary history is that he writes in a spirit too exclusively literary. He estimates everything by its influence upon poetry, and in estimating poetry he sets a value sometimes much too high upon the fresh and unconstrained expression of human life and passions and the delights of the visible world, without considering the intrinsic worthiness of the singer's desires, or the ultimate tendency of his aspirations. As we said in the beginning of this notice, our author never overlooks the historical connection between the progress and decline of literature and the changes in society and public morals; but in the critical consideration of literary movements he is too apt to set aside the ethical and philosophical points of the question altogether. If this disposition is a defect of Professor Scherer's literary history, it is a virtue in his同胞's. Here is Mr. Howell's beautiful little "Thanksgiving" reprinted by "The Boston Transcript" and credited to "Anonymous." And this in his own city, go to! And a poem which had made its way into collections, found!

"Lend a Hand" for March shows that this magazine of organized philanthropy not only maintains its standard set up by the first number, but is making decided progress. It is, in brief, dedicated to teach Dr. Hale's favorite lesson:

"Up and down and down;
Look for me and not me;
And lend a hand."

The copy of the first edition of Pope's translation of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" which he gave to his friend, Nathaniel Piggot, has these lines inscribed by him on the fly-leaf:

The Muse this Verse to learn'd Pigeon addresses.

In a few heart, like his writings, was never found

Whom Pope prov'd his friend, in his trothless distresses, Once in danger of death, once in danger of Law. —See. 23, 726.

"Once in danger of death" is an allusion to an accident when Piggot's carriage, in which Pope was riding, was upset and two of his fingers were seriously injured. The copy is to be sold at auction.

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